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To cite this article: Wendy Luttrell (2010) 'A camera is a big responsibility': a lens for analysing children's visual voices, *Visual Studies*, 25:3, 224-237, DOI: [10.1080/1472586X.2010.523274](https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2010.523274)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2010.523274>



Published online: 01 Dec 2010.



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# 'A camera is a big responsibility': a lens for analysing children's visual voices

WENDY LUTTRELL

*This article is based on longitudinal image-based research conducted with working-class immigrant boys and girls in a US public school context. Picture taking is one part of a larger ethnographic exploration of how the children perceive and navigate linguistic, cultural, race/ethnic and economic differences, family-school relationships, and self and identity changes over time.*

*The article discusses a mode of visual research and analysis the author has adopted which is dynamic and relational; it resists any single orientation to children's photography – whether as an aesthetic experience, a socio-cultural activity or a cognitive-developmental process, to name three common perspectives. Instead, her goal is to create a 'need-to-know-more' stance towards children as knowing subjects and to appreciate the limits of what we can see, know and understand about their childhood contexts, individual subjectivities and exercise of multiple voices.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the past twenty years, research across the disciplines has sought to 'give voice' to disenfranchised or 'silenced' populations. This focus on 'voice' has also been the lynchpin of the new 'sociology/anthropology of childhood' that has critiqued existing scholarship on children as 'adultist' and called for new research methods that might minimise adults' 'voicing over' children's perspectives and experiences. A popular formulation for mutual research practices is the call for adults to *work with* rather than *working on, about or for* children (James and Prout 1997; Thorne 1993, 2002; Mayall 1994; Qvortrup 1994; Hallett and Prout 2003; Orellana 2009). 'Giving kids cameras' research is part of this larger research effort to afford children full presence in knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Still, while the theme of voice has been galvanising, the *concept* of voice and how various researchers are using it in their photography-based projects remains under-theorised. As many scholars have acknowledged, how the 'voices' of subjugated/marginalised populations are produced, whose voices are

being represented, under what specific circumstances and towards what ends is not always made explicit.<sup>2</sup>

This article is based on participatory image-based research that I have been conducting with working-class immigrant boys and girls in a US public school context. Picture taking was one part of a larger ethnographic exploration of how the children perceived the linguistic, cultural, race/ethnic and economic diversity of their school and understood family-school relationships.<sup>3</sup> This work has led me on a search for a more comprehensive approach to analysing children's voices as expressed through their images and words.

## IMAGE, VOICE AND NARRATIVE

My project is based on several theoretical premises I wish to clarify. I start from the premise that there are multiple layers of meaning in any single photograph and that children have intentions and make deliberate choices (albeit prescribed) to represent themselves and others, sometimes in an effort to 'speak back' to dominant or stereotypical images (Luttrell 2003).<sup>4</sup>

In the largest sense, children's picture taking is prescribed by 'controlling images' that orient them about what is 'natural', 'normal', inevitable or desirable<sup>5</sup> – what Foucault would call an 'inspecting gaze' that individuals exercise 'over, and against' themselves (1980, 155). This 'inspecting gaze' is expressed through institutionalised arrangements, practices and discourses through which our 'very eyesight [is] pressed into service as a mode of social control' (Wexler 2000, 5). That photography is a technology with tremendous power in directing the gaze – a critique made by numerous scholars – is well established. But photography can also redirect, contest and unlock the gaze, which is an aim I share with many other scholars who utilise visual methods to promote social awareness and justice and who are dedicated to fostering 'visual rights'.<sup>6</sup> As John Berger suggests, a photograph can harbour a potential for alternative narratives or 'hidden transcripts' (Scott

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1990) that challenge power relations. It was with an eye and ear for hidden transcripts of power expressed in children's photography that I crafted this project.

I turned to photography for two reasons: first, because it is an especially useful metaphor for thinking about how we read our social worlds, construct our selves in relation to others, and express matters of the heart; and second, because it is a means to both rouse and reframe conversations (a) among the children themselves; (b) between the children and participating adults (researchers, teachers, parents); and (c) among viewers/readers (specifically educators) about children's own understandings and experiences of childhood. That said, I did not assume that there is an authentic, single or neutral voice inside a child to be elicited through an image.<sup>7</sup> Nor did I assume an undifferentiated children's voice that is set apart from an adult voice. Rather, I sought to understand which voices children would exercise when speaking about their photographs in specific contexts and with multiple audiences in mind.

A concept of 'voice' that is dialogic, cultural, social and psychological grounds my study; and it is teasing out the children's engagement in and struggle with the swirls and tugs of others' words, ideas, dreams and disappointments that is my goal. Such a process – what Bakhtin calls ventriloquation – recognises that we speak with the words and intentions of others in an effort to make our own meaning. For Bakhtin this is an ongoing, cultural and ideological process, 'an intense struggle within us for hegemony of various available and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values' (1981, 346). At the same time, I also understand one's speaking 'voice' – its tone, rhythm and pitch – to be a 'powerful psychological instrument and channel connecting inner and outer worlds' (Gilligan 1993, xvi).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, 'voice' should not be conflated with language, just as silence should not be confused with sound, but with what is unspoken or unsayable (Rogers 2010).

Narrative is a particular discourse type featured in all my research (Luttrell 1997, 2003) that I understand as intersubjective – produced of many available voices where meanings are shared, contested and attributed to experience. Narratives are retrospective – they shape and order past experience and organise people, events and objects into a meaningful whole. Unlike a chronology – 'I did this, then this, then that' – narratives communicate a point of view and aim to accomplish particular purposes – for example, to entertain, inform, impress or dispute. And as I have argued elsewhere, when working with children and youth, narratives can be offered in bits and

pieces and without the same sense of 'coherence' often associated with adult speakers (Luttrell 2003). I am drawn to children's narratives because they provide a space for authorship, dialogue, cultural belonging and critical social awareness,<sup>9</sup> and because narrative inquiry places demands on researchers to attend to links between history, biography, identity, emotions and change over time.<sup>10</sup>

My perspective on the relationship between image, voice and narrative has expanded since my last study (Luttrell 2003). I did not anticipate the full extent to which photography and the camera (both still and video) would produce so much information and open up so many different perspectives, values, emotions and memories. Other researchers using cameras with young people suggest that photographs (taken either by children or by researchers) can introduce content and topics that might otherwise be overlooked or poorly understood from an adult viewpoint and can trigger new information, memories and meanings for the interviewees (Collier 1967; Schwartz 1989; Clark 1999; Orellana 1999; Rasmussen 1999; Rich and Chalfen 1999; Banks 2001; Harper 2002; Clark-Ibanez 2004; Burke 2005; Lykes 2001; Prosser 1988; Pink 2001).

I agree. And finding a means to both systematise and honour the wealth of information and affect being communicated with and through children's photography has been daunting. In reading through the literature, it has not always been clear what frameworks and analytic strategies researchers are using to interpret what children might be trying to communicate through photography. A lack of transparency and reflexivity in many reports I have read makes it hard to assess whose interpretation is whose in the 'reading' of children's photographs, their intentions and their perceived audiences, to name a few. A persistent conundrum in this mode of research is finding the line between children's voices and those of adult researchers, who seek to represent them (Piper and Frankham 2007) – a conundrum that I do not claim to have resolved, but wish to acknowledge.

The mode of visual research and analysis I have adopted is dynamic and relational; it resists any single orientation to children's photography – whether as an aesthetic experience, a socio-cultural activity or a cognitive-developmental process, to name three common perspectives (Sharples et al. 2003). Instead, my goal is to create a 'need-to-know-more' stance towards children as knowing subjects and to appreciate the limits of what we can see, know and understand.

## BACKGROUND AND STUDY DESIGN

### Setting

The school in which this collaborative research took place is like many urban elementary schools struggling to meet the federally imposed standards of *No Child Left Behind*. It is located in a neighbourhood that is rich in racial, ethnic, national, linguistic and some economic diversity, and is in a northeastern, post-industrial city that has been home to diverse and shifting groups of immigrants since the turn of the century. The research was initiated in 2003 when I first visited the school's principal, who was looking for strategies to help integrate immigrant parents and their children into the school culture.

The kindergarten through sixth grade public school serves immigrant families from a range of nations, including (to name a few) Albania, Iran, Kenya, Puerto Rico and Vietnam. Of the 370 students enrolled, 92% are eligible for free and reduced school lunch, 37% are White, 10% are Black, 18% are Asian and 35% are Hispanic.<sup>11</sup> This context provided an unusual opportunity to investigate diverse working-class children's understandings and experiences of the relationship between family, community and school and to explore whether there were differences between how the children (native born, immigrant and children of immigrants) perceived and navigated social and cultural differences in the school setting.

Added to this was my own enduring interest in self and identity formation, especially during life transitions and the experiences of being betwixt and between – whether in terms of between home and new country and language, or between childhood and teenage-hood. I wanted to understand how the young people themselves characterised these changes over time, space, and in relationship with others.<sup>12</sup>

### Participants

The fifth-grade teachers, the principal and the technology instructor selected the participating children with attention to the following three criteria: (a) racial, ethnic and economic diversity, making sure to include students from the two largest immigrants groups (i.e. Asia and Latin/South America); (b) both boys and girls; and (c) a range of academic performance levels. All the children spoke English fluently, with the exception of one child from Iran who was learning English during her first year in the project.

Securing parental permission and informed consent was brokered by various members of the school community (the principal, the teachers, the school secretary) and evolved over time to include permission for release of video and photographic images as parents became more comfortable. Children's assent was built into the project at numerous points, and included their active editing and decision-making about what images would become public, and whether they wanted to continue their participation into the sixth grade.<sup>13</sup> As has been recommended by others, the children were given multiple opportunities to 'opt in' to the project as well as to 'opt out', to minimise feelings of forced compliance within the school setting (Alderson 1995; Valentine 1999).

## PROCESS

### Our Stance

Unlike photography projects that have provided children with tutorials on picture taking, we did not view the children as 'apprentices of adult photographers' (Sharples et al. 2003).<sup>14</sup> We did not encourage the children to produce a particular kind of image and instead believed there is merit in projects that seek to preserve and understand whatever meanings children might give to their images if we listened carefully and systematically.

We adapted principles of Photovoice which, as described elsewhere in this Special Issue, puts cameras in the hands of people who have been left out of policy decision-making, or denied access to and participation in matters that concern their daily lives (Wang and Burris 1997; Wang 1999; Strack, Magill, and McDonagh 2004; Lorenz this volume; Lykes this volume). We explained to the children that this was an opportunity for them to represent their point of view and experiences to adults in charge of teaching children like themselves and making decisions in schools. One aim of the research was to use the children's photographs, narrations and self representations with teachers and educators-in-training as a means to enhance their awareness of children's funds of knowledge.

### Picture Taking

In fifth grade the children were given a disposable analogue camera with 27 exposures and four days (from Thursday to Monday) to photograph their school, family and community lives. Beyond very basic instructions

about using the camera, and a discussion (with role-playing) about the ethics of picture taking (focusing on issues of intrusion, embarrassment and consent),<sup>15</sup> the children were left to their own devices with as little adult guidance as possible. They were asked to 'imagine you have a cousin your age that is moving to town and coming to your school. Take pictures of the school, your family and community that will help him/her know what to expect.'<sup>16</sup> In sixth grade the children had the camera for a longer stretch of time (1-2 weeks) and were invited to photograph 'whatever matters most' to them.

It was clear that the children associated me and the research assistants with dominant educational values, including, in their words, 'staying on task' and completing their 'assignment' of taking photographs. We were curious to investigate how the children would take up, bend or reject dominant school discourses (i.e. performance, achievement, meritocracy, upward mobility). Yet we wanted to open a space for conversations that do not typically take place in school settings, especially in an increasingly competitive and high-stakes test-driven environment.

During the introductory session, we asked about the children's prior experiences with photography, and learned that for many, this would be their first camera. In addition to the palpable excitement in the room, the children also expressed concern, captured by Jeffrey's earnest assessment that 'having a camera is a big responsibility' and would require special care so as not to 'break it' or 'lose it'. This conversation seemed ordinary at the time, but in retrospect, it foreshadowed two important findings: first, that some children viewed the camera as more than a tool for documenting their lives; they also saw it as a valued possession. And, as will be discussed, there were distinctions between the ways in which different children took ownership and control of the camera. Second, Jeffrey's concern and that of his classmates about the *care* of the camera and his invocation of the language of *responsibility* was part of a larger dialogue about how the children's *care worlds* would be made visible and audible, which will be discussed further.

### Picture Viewing: Four Audiencings

We picked up the children's cameras and had the photographs developed within days of the children's picture taking. Either I or a research assistant met individually with each child to discuss her/his set of 27 photographs – this was the first of four audiencing

sessions. We asked each child to explain what was happening in each image, why she/he had taken it, what, if anything, was important about the picture, and whether there were any photographs she/he wished she/he could have taken but did not or could not. At the end of each individual interview we invited the children to select their five favourite photographs – the photographs they felt best represented themselves and that they wished to make public.

These interviews were audio- and video-taped. We were immediately struck by how differently each child engaged the interviewer and the camera as an audience. Some children made direct eye contact with the video camera, and at times would turn their photograph to the camera as they spoke about it. Others spoke directly to the interviewer, as if the camera were not there. As the children sorted through their set of photographs, some had ready explanations for each picture, often referencing one of the prompts, 'I took that picture to show what I do after-school.' Others expressed surprise and often delight at photographs they did not recognise: 'Oh, my little sister must have taken that picture!' and 'Ah, that is a picture of my cousin's birthday party; my mom wanted pictures so she took the camera. Oh, look, that's me!' Others worked around, resisted or redirected an interviewer's prodding.

During these interviews we learned how common it was for the children to hand their cameras over to a family member, friend or teacher to take a picture of them 'doing something good', as one child put it (i.e. reading, recycling, completing homework, doing chores and helping others). There was an interesting pattern that echoed one found by Richard Chalfen in his youth film project in Philadelphia during the 1970s (Chalfen 1981). In brief, he found that working-class youth were most interested in *appearing* on camera and less concerned about who took the images, whereas middle-class youth were more concerned about *being in control* of the camera and of editing as a means to express a point or tell something about life. In a similar vein, the most advantaged children who participated in this project (in terms of parental occupation, education and economic resources) were least likely to hand their cameras over (or to report having a family member take over the camera).<sup>17</sup>

The children also had their own purposes and audiences in mind for taking certain pictures. For example, during his interview, Gabriel turned away from the interviewer and spoke directly to the video camera while holding his photograph up for view: 'Mommy, I took this picture for

you. I'm sorry that it is blurry.' Gabriel wanted his mother to have a picture inside the church they attend because 'it means so much to her', and because he loves her so much, 'I could explode from so much.'

The children's interactions with the interviewer – predominantly White, female graduate students in their twenties and early thirties, and me, a White middle-aged professor – provided rich insight into their identity work, including how they took charge of the interview (or not), set the pace, asserted their expertise, resisted some questions, played with power, cued into authority and status, shifted discussion (i.e. 'I'm not ready to talk about that') or found their own purpose for the assignment, as Gabriel did.

This individual, one-on-one interview was followed by a peer-group audiencing session. We asked the children to lay out their photographs on a long table and to talk about what they noticed about each other's images, and to ask any questions they might have of the photographer. This opened the space for undirected, spontaneous dialogue between the children. We worked inductively to identify children's own categories of difference and how they were negotiating their social placements as they spoke about the people, places and things they noticed in each other's photographs. We did seek clarification at times about what the children were noticing, as I explain below, but we tried not to interrupt the flow of conversation.

Throughout these conversations we noticed the children moved in and out of marking or muting racial/ethnic markers, and took up different voices to do so. For example, in these small group sessions, Asian people who had been photographed were routinely referred to as 'Chinese' by the children viewers, and this went uncorrected by the child photographers who knew otherwise (i.e. that the photographed were instead Laotian or Vietnamese). By contrast, when children referred to Latino/Latinas pictured as '*the Spanish*', the child photographers offered a corrective response, including, 'Oh, my sister doesn't speak Spanish' or, 'That's my uncle, he's Dominican.' Wondering whether the children were aware of these seeing, noticing and naming practices, I asked how they knew what to call a person's racial/ethnic background. Several children explained that there was a school rule against calling someone Black; 'It isn't respecting,' offered Camille (who is Black). I asked what they thought about the rule, and after a moment of silence, Jack (who is White) said, 'Well you could get into trouble.' This was one among many exchanges where the children took up different

voices about racial/ethnic difference, including a 'pedagogic voice' embedded in their perception of school rules (Arnot and Reay 2007). In this case, Camille, who focused on respect, and Jack, who focused on trouble evidenced different orientations to the pedagogic discourse as they struggled to make it their own.

A similar discursive pattern was found regarding children's orientation to 'consumer voice' (Thomson 2008). While taking notice of each other's personal/family possessions animated the group discussions, there was no unifying message. The children's conversations and questions of each other about computers, televisions, video games, Xboxes, clothing, celebrity posters, stuffed animals, collectibles and treasured 'stuff' (in the words of one child) touched on multiple themes and emotions about participating in consumer culture.<sup>18</sup> Themes included comfort, cultural belonging, expertise, longing, envy, pride, fear and curiosity. For example, of her picture taken in her bedroom, Camille remarked, 'This is where I feel respect', and Nina told her peers proudly, 'These are dishes my mom brought all the way from Albania'. One child lingered over a picture taken by another child of the child's home and remarked, 'I wish I lived in an apartment like that'. Conversations about household items included matter-of-fact accountings of family resources, such as, 'My mom says we can't get cable until she gets another job'. Children also questioned adult scripts – as, for example, in the case of a child who said of another child's photograph of his living room, 'My parents say The Gardens [a public housing unit] isn't safe so I can't go there, but it looks *nice*' [speaker's emphasis].

These group sessions, juxtaposed with the individual interviews, highlighted the relational nature of the children's meaning-making process. For example, recall that Gabriel addressed his mother as the primary audience for his picture of the church. But in conversation with his peers, he emphasised that he took the picture because this is where he goes to 'hang with the teenagers' who invite him to join their activities even though he is 'only in fifth grade'. All of Gabriel's different identity claims in dialogue with different audiences must be preserved as a means to understand his voice – his attachment to his mother; his negotiation of status with his peers; and his shift away from the interviewer/educator gaze where he uses the assignment for his own purposes.

In the third audiencing session we showed video clips that we had edited of each child explaining his/her five favourite photographs, asking a child what, if anything,

he/she might wish to change or delete before it would be shown publicly (including to their teachers and other educators-in-training). The children could then decide whether the video clip would remain part of the project data and could make any changes they wished.

The fourth and final audiencing session for the children was to curate an exhibition of their photographs. Designing and publicly displaying their own and each other's work for a broad audience generated an altogether different kind of dialogue about the children's criteria for what constituted a 'good' exhibition picture – whether it was thought good for its aesthetic, sentimental or evidentiary value – and about the most important content that they wished to convey, which I will discuss more in the following section. This was also an opportunity for them to put together text and image (titles and captions) and to plan the format for the exhibition, discussing the best way to communicate their message. Each public exhibition took a slightly different form, utilising their photographs, video and sound.

Alongside the child-centred piece of the project was a teacher-centred piece which brought teachers/educators-in-training together to reflect on what they saw (and did not see) in the children's photographs; to ask what the pictures made them want to know more about the children's lives; to identify the feelings aroused by specific photographs; and to engage multiple perspectives. These group deliberations brought into sharp focus the values, beliefs and assumptions that were shaping what teachers saw and understood. Each year of the project the children selected a set of photographs they specifically wanted teachers/educators to view. This is an aspect of the project that has to do with teachers' vision and voices, but is beyond the scope of this article.

## ANALYTIC MOVES

This section describes how we moved through different strategies to comprehend the complexities and intimacies of the children's photographs.

### Organising the Materials for Analysis

I found no ready-made framework for organising and systematising the multiple data types – photographic images, video images, field notes and transcripts of the varied audiencing sessions. The ongoing archival decision-making process deserves a fuller discussion than space allows, as I anticipated following up with the children when they were completing high school. The

photographs were organised by individual child, in the order in which they were taken, and then given code numbers and uploaded to a password-protected website. Other content (e.g. consisting of transcribed interviews) related to each child was added to his/her folder as it became available for analysis. But before embarking on a systematic individual case-based analysis, we first wanted to establish an inventory of people, places and things portrayed across all 1352 pictures.

### Picture Content Analysis

We developed a theoretical and inductive code list. We coded for setting (e.g. family, school, community, inside, outdoors); people (e.g. children/adults; male/female; age and gender mix); things (e.g. technological, household items, personal possessions, toys and games); genre (e.g. snapshot, landscape, portrait).<sup>19</sup> Since we were interested in the children's portrayal of social relationships, positioning and power dynamics, we coded for what Erving Goffman calls shared 'idioms of posture, position, and glances' that express how people 'wordlessly choreograph [themselves] relative to others in social situations' (Goffman 1979, 21).<sup>20</sup> We also adapted features of the Lutz and Collins (1993) coding-scheme activity type (i.e. work, play, socialising); activity level (i.e. low, medium, high); gaze (i.e. looking at the camera, looking away from camera); and smile (or not). We also included codes for things the children had noticed in each other's photographs, such as brand-name items, hand signs and babies (a distinctive age category that we had not originally attended to).

A multicultural team of graduate students who had not been involved in data gathering coded 100 randomly selected photographs, after which reliability was calculated at 0.70 and the team gathered to discuss discrepancies.<sup>21</sup> Coders were asked to base their judgement on the information apparent in the photograph and not to make inferences about the photographer's intentions. Category headings were explained further and each term given a description, plus qualifications or exemplars. After another round of reliability testing all photographs were triple coded and data were entered into statistical analysis software (SAS/STAT).

The reason for doing this type of categorical content analysis was less about establishing replicable or valid inferences, and more about being systematic and transparent about one way of seeing/reading the photographs and to identify patterns that might be 'too subtle to be visible on a casual inspection' (Lutz and Collins 1993, 89).

It was our impression that there was a preponderance of images of family life, but the content analysis allowed us to identify specific patterns and frequencies – for example, that 86.4% of the photographs were taken inside compared with 12.6% outside (and 1% unascertainable); that boys were more likely to take photographs in the community while girls were more likely to take photographs at school; that Latino/a children were the most likely to take pictures at home; and that adult women were photographed more than four times more often than adult men (immigrant children were more likely to have included male adults in their pictures than the children of immigrants or native-born children). Household items far outnumbered school items, with televisions and computers being most prevalent.

The preponderance of images about family life over those of school life could suggest that the children embraced the prescription that ‘cameras go with family life’, reflecting what is said to be the earliest use of photography – the establishment of the ‘family album’ (Sontag 1977, 8).

### Narrating/Listening for Signs of Care

We carried out a separate analysis in which we were looking for salient themes and patterns in what the children *had to say about* their photographs. What versions of self, family, school and community life, and relationships did the children seek to portray? What cultural and ideological conventions might be inferred from the children’s intentions – for example, showing family unity and happiness? Writing of family albums as ‘home mode communication’, Richard Chalfen (1987) argues that family photography shows preferred versions of family life over the day-to-day realities. Family albums feature a taken-for-granted narrative of progress and sense of accomplishment that characterises how White, Anglo-American, middle-class ‘Polaroid people’ look at themselves, and that are more or less constructed deliberately by parents to generate memoirs for their children.

As in Chalfen’s study, the children emphasised *relationships* – intergenerational ties; kinship bonds; connection to the (home)land and to accumulated goods. However, the meanings that the children attached to these relationships emphasised everyday rhythms of working-class life, and a recognition that *care work* matters for their survival and self regard. The taken-for-granted, often invisible and unspoken *work* associated with care and its emotional salience was

voiced by the children participating in this project. Paying attention to how the children narrated signs of care (and its ambiguities, anxieties and stigma) is a theme I will draw attention to in this article.<sup>22</sup> There were other themes that are beyond the scope of the article.

Gina took a photograph of her mother in the kitchen preparing coffee for her father, who would return home while Gina was asleep. As she explained, her father works the night shift at a local retail store, and sleeps for four hours before doing carpentry work in people’s houses; in her words, ‘his life is pretty scheduled’. Because Cornelio’s mom’s work schedule did not allow for her picture to be taken, he took a picture of the living room that ‘my mom, she’s been waiting for years to get done’. He pointed out the new floor tile that his mother had selected and that his stepfather had installed, and the new television (what could be characterised as a narrative of progress and accomplishment).<sup>23</sup> Woven into his account of the constraints upon his photo-taking was an expression of awe for his mom’s family care work: ‘I most admire my mom cause of everything she does for us; it is tough, I don’t know how she does it, doing everything for us’. He went on to explain that the family can now gather in the living room to watch television, except for his mother, ‘who is too busy to sit down and watch, she’s working all the time working, cooking and cleaning, and taking care of us so there’s a lot of things she can’t do’.

Many children took a photograph of a photograph to deliberately portray parents who were unavailable. Still others documented the absent presence of parents (mostly fathers) who were no longer in their lives because of divorce, separation, incarceration, illness or death by taking photographs of cherished objects. Similarly, immigrant children with family members living afar found inventive means to photograph traces of life lived together with extended kin in their home country – as Angeline did when she photographed clothes in her closet to keep alive her memory of her grandparents in Kenya: ‘some clothes are very special because it’s something I can remember about them, when I look down at it [my clothes] I remember them’.

The children used their photographs to narrate everyday life and a working-class childhood upbringing that Annette Lareau (2003) would call the ‘accomplishment of natural growth’. Conversations about family photographs swirled around complex after-school care arrangements and weekend routines organised to accommodate parents’ work schedules. The children



showed themselves 'hanging out' after school and on weekends with siblings and cousins generating their own leisure activities (watching television, playing video games) or completing domestic chores, rather than participating in the many self-development after-school and weekend activities afforded to middle-class American children.<sup>24</sup>

Girls deliberately displayed and staged their completed domestic work or implements of their work, such as vacuum cleaners, in ways that indicated their pride of place in domestic life. Alison posed in front of her completed chores, asking her sister to take the picture:

And this is me going to fold the laundry, *all* the laundry. I usually do that every day of the week; I do it to help my mother out . . . she's usually too tired so I do this to help her out. [Her emphasis]

Both the conditions and the social character (gendered and classed) of care work were made visible and audible as the children engaged in the photography exercise. For example, girls were more likely to take pictures of their domestic work (laundry, dishes, children they care for), while the boys were more likely to photograph their play (bicycles, sport equipment, video games); girls spoke about *caring for* others, while boys spoke about being *cared for*, especially by their mothers.

Still, both expressed gratitude for what they had. As they narrated their care worlds, they spoke of family obligation, responsibility and solidarity against a tide of outside constraints about which the children were acutely aware – inflexible and irregular work schedules; transportation problems; working double shifts to make ends meet; lack of paid leave or sick time, and so forth.<sup>25</sup>

Reliance on kinship networks and on girls' domestic labour have long been known to be class-based survival strategies, especially among single mothers (Dodson and Dickert 2004). In the larger context of welfare reform and 'work-first' mandates, employers may see single mothers' work performance as evidence of a poor 'work ethic' as they attend to children's needs, and teachers may view mothers' lack of traditional participation as reflecting inadequate parenting. But the children used their photography to present a counter narrative, inviting us to 'see beyond' normative versions.

These patterns and themes about care worlds and relationships provide an important picture of childhood contexts. Still, in order to grasp what an individual child was seeking to communicate requires an in-depth

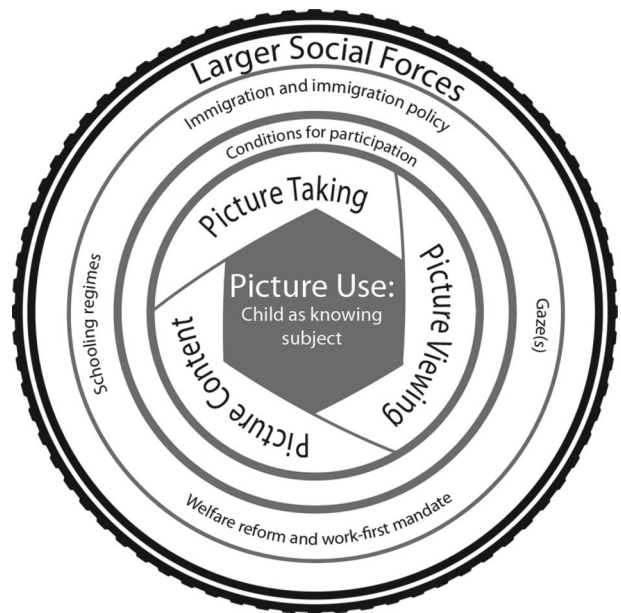


FIGURE 1. Lens for viewing children's meaning making through photography.

case-based rather than categorical analysis.<sup>26</sup> For this, we listened for two sets of linkages *within* each child's narration of her/his images over time: first, for links between autobiographical details and larger social conditions; and second, for a child's preferred identities, on the one hand, and ambiguities about self on the other (Luttrell et al. forthcoming).

### CHILDREN AS KNOWING SUBJECTS AND THE COMPLEX LIFE OF THEIR IMAGES

It would not do justice to the children's agency or investment in their images to collapse the meaning of their photographs into any single theoretical framework. Nor would it do justice to the children's engagement with the 'complex life'<sup>27</sup> of their own and each other's images.

To visualise the dynamics of children's meaning making, I offer Figure 1, introducing the language of photography/optics. The eye at the centre of the lens draws attention to the two-sided nature of children's agency (and voice), which can either be opened up or closed down depending on an ever-widening set of mechanisms and forces. Listed here are some that came into focus in this project, but readers can envisage others that open and close the shutter, so to speak, on children's use of photography as a lens on their childhood contexts and individual subjectivities.

The previous sections elaborated analytic moves between the children's *picture taking* and its constraints (e.g.



FIGURE 2. My family.

standardised test-driven schooling, the project's instructions, parents' work schedules, separation from home places and kin), *picture viewing* in dialogue with different audiences, conventions and ideologies (e.g. schooling expectations, youth media and consumption culture, discourses of race/ethnicity, family unity and harmony), and *picture content* of what is made visible about social positioning and placement (e.g. choreography of care work). These three 'sites' of meaning-making have often been pulled apart, as Gillian Rose writes (2001, 16). But in practice, these are not discrete but part of a whole. And meanings are made and remade as the child *uses* his/her photography and photographs for self- and identity-making purposes – to communicate across and about social distinctions and cultural differences; to express love, connection and solidarity; to show pride and self regard; to seek and express aesthetic pleasure; to defend against negative judgement. Children's *picture use* must also be understood to be in dialogue with or in conflict with, if not to be refocusing on, larger social forces, including immigration and immigration policy, welfare reform and work-first mandates, excessive wage-work demands,

care injustice, schooling regimes and the gazes of others whom the children may fear, mistrust or seek to impress.

Let us apply this analytic approach to the complex life of Tina's images. Tina set the pace of her interview, moving quickly through her photographs, smiling broadly, frowning and giggling as she identified the photographs that 'came out good' or were 'mistakes'. When she came upon a picture of a family portrait (Figure 2) she lingered a bit and explained: 'I took a picture of my family. I couldn't take a picture 'cause my family weren't there yet. My mom and dad went to work, so I couldn't take a picture of them.' Like so many others, Tina's picture-taking was constrained by the demands of her parents' work life. Still, she found a way to provide a 'trace of life as it is lived or has been lived' (Berger 1980, 54). This family portrait, on first appearance, portrays a sense of harmony and unity, as Chalfen would argue; or, perhaps an illusion of coherence and 'normality' set against a 'flow of family life' that does not match up with what Tina might imagine her viewers to expect or that she herself wants to represent (Hirsch 1997, 7).<sup>28</sup> And the choreography of the picture places adults and children relative to each other, making visible what might otherwise go unnoticed about family structure: father's dominance, mother's centrality, encircled by children. But listening to Tina extends, if not alters, this reading.

Tina points to the left side of the picture where a person is slightly visible, 'I was here [outside the circle of male children]. I was going to take it just up to there. I couldn't take a picture of me.' 'Why?' asks the interviewer. 'Cause I didn't like myself. I look ugly' [glancing at the video camera for the first time, as if addressing an other's gaze]. Tina moves on to the next photograph she has taken of a series of framed school photographs of herself and her brothers that are hung above the door in her kitchen. Of this display Tina says, 'This is my big brother; this is me; this is my other brother, this is the [hesitating] fourth brother, this is my littlest brother.' The interviewer observes, 'So you are the only girl.' 'Yeah, so that's why.'

Is that why Tina is the absent presence in the family portrait – because she is a girl? What doesn't she like about her looks, and how is she exercising control over her self-representation? Does she prefer her looks in the display of school photographs that are lined up by birth order compared with the family portrait where she sits on the edge of the circle? As Tina speaks about the school photographs she takes up the voice of her grandmother who advises her mother about what's 'good for the

children', including the need to 'wear red' (for good luck) in the school photographs [Tina changes the register of her voice as if it is her grandmother speaking]. She also speaks of sibling resemblances and rivalries, and wonders aloud about 'who do I look most like?' Then she moves on to the next photograph, which is a picture of a photograph taken of her parents in Vietnam. 'This is my dad. He's the fourth one in his family. And my mom, she's the thirteenth. My grandma has sixteen [children]. 'Cause over in Vietnam, there's no medicine to stop being pregnant. So she keeps having it and having it, up 'til the sixteenth.'

Tina's voice incorporates the words, intentions and gazes of others as she narrates her family photographs. Fragments of meaning include the following: her desire to have a picture of her nuclear family despite her parents' work schedule; her deliberate alteration of herself in the family portrait; her ties to her home land and grandmother; sibling bonds and rivalries; and her knowledge, if not curiosity, about conditions regarding family life, including sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth. But this is not where the story ends.

In the peer group context, Tina's family portrait drew considerable interest, evoking a range of reactions and new readings. One child remarked, 'It looks old fashioned'; another asked, 'Why is no one smiling?', to which another responded, 'Perhaps they are sad about leaving their country.' Jack surveyed the whole set of photographs being displayed by his classmates and said, 'I see different cultures, *no offence*'. 'What do you mean?' I asked as some children nervously laughed.

'There are Chinese or is it Japanese? Spanish, White, Black. I don't mean to be mean, or rude or anything . . . ' [Readers will remember the school rule]. New meanings circulated around Tina's family portrait as the children brought their own imagery and experiences to their viewing – in this case, about history and memory; about the loss and sadness of immigration; about smiling as an affective norm for a family portrait; and about the fact that marking cultural difference can be offensive.

Tina's classmates wanted her family portrait to be displayed for public exhibition, but Tina refused, arguing that despite it being her favourite (and admired by her peers), it was not, in her words, a 'real' photograph of her family because she and her new-born brother were missing. Whatever array of meanings it held for Tina, she insisted on the importance of the evidentiary value of the photograph for her public self-representation. Instead, she suggested another one of her favourite pictures, one that her peers read as



FIGURE 3. Fish.

'gross', 'mysterious' and 'scary', but still agreed was exhibition-worthy. Tina explained that she had taken this picture at her mother's direction while the two of them prepared dinner together (Figure 3).

What glimpses into her family world, self and identity are we afforded by Tina's assertion of control over which photograph to display? Tina also asserted her editorial authority after seeing and hearing the video clip of herself narrating her five favourite photographs. She worried that she 'sounded stupid' in the video and requested an additional segment with her speaking in Vietnamese. After finishing, she translated, 'If you don't learn good, like if there is a test and you get an F or D, teacher will hit us, with a stick, and you have to sit there until your parents come to pick us up.' To whom is Tina addressing these words? How does speaking in her native tongue serve her purposes better than speaking in English? What social and psychological connection is she trying to make, or refusing to lose, by her efforts to self represent? This example reminds us of the cultural, social and sensory dimension of children's voices and their desire to hear a voice that they recognise as their own. While 'voice' should not be conflated with language, language *does* allow for some expression of 'voice' that is beyond words. These are the 'need-to-know-more' questions and curiosity that this visual inquiry and analysis invites and seeks to address.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND CAUTIONS

The use of visual methods allows those who might otherwise go unnoticed to be recognised and afforded voice in the body politic. This is the social justice impulse of critical childhood/youth studies and the 'giving kids cameras' research that has become so popular. Still, I am

concerned that we remain sceptical, cautious and curious about the relationship between what we can see and what we can know through this mode of inquiry.

I want to urge that when we conduct photography projects with young people, we do so with a self-conscious effort to incorporate them as producers, interpreters, circulators, exhibitors and social analysts of their own and each other's images. I also urge that we make our analytic lenses more transparent. The more transparent and reflexive we are about our research, the more we will be able to reorient adult-child conversations and what we, as adults, are able to see and hear, focused less on our own assumptions, preconceptions and concerns, and more on those of the young people with whom we work. We also need projects that open up opportunities to unsettle, fragment or dislodge other's gazes – if only for moments in time where young people can see themselves and be seen by others in alternative ways.

It is equally important that we highlight the circumstances under which young people make and control their visual images as they contend with economic and family hardship. Particularly relevant for this project was the issue of who could participate in the photography project to begin with – those children who lived in families that were, relatively speaking, stable and who lived safe from harm. For example, one of the participants was forced to leave the school because his family had to move to a homeless shelter outside the school district. And despite the efforts of the principal to arrange for him to continue attending the school (including her personal willingness to provide transportation each day), there were too many obstacles to overcome. We also became aware that several children could not secure parental permission because of worries about identifying information on the part of their parents, including mothers who had restraining orders on former spouses/boyfriends, and who thus feared the risks associated with exposing household spaces.

Photographs are no more transparent than any other form of data, but they do present a different set of ethical, legal and moral concerns compared with spoken words.<sup>29</sup> Using photography had the unintended effect of excluding those children who were especially vulnerable, whose domestic spaces or family members might be identified by those who could do them harm (e.g. other family members, immigration officials, social service officials). Indeed, the extent to which children depend upon adult care and nurture for survival makes children's access to and experience of freedom of

expression and their exercise of voice dependent upon adequate provision of care and safety. And perhaps this is yet another way to understand why the children who could participate in this project went to such great lengths to photograph and speak about their care worlds upon which they depend for both their survival and their self regard, but that others fail to see or acknowledge as part of their everyday lives.

In a context of neo-liberal social policies that have had adverse effects on young people's care worlds – whether immigration policy, welfare reform or a test-driven educational system that pushes out those who cannot measure up – these young people's images and narratives provide a glimpse of the social connections that they see and value, if not fear may be at risk. Perhaps the children's voices and concerns are ahead of social theorists and policy makers who have ignored the centrality and intimacies of care giving and care taking, and we need to take heed.

## NOTES

- [1] See Wagner (1999) for his introduction to a special issue dedicated to how childhood is seen by children that set the stage for much of the research in this field.
- [2] See Arnot and Reay (2007) for their excellent review and critique of 'voice research' in which they call for an alternative notion of student voice based on the work of Basil Bernstein. These authors focus on sociological voice research not psychological research which this study seeks to combine. Also see Piper and Frankham (2007).
- [3] The ethnography included classroom observations, informal interviews with school personnel, and participant observation in various school activities. The children were followed from fifth grade through the end of sixth grade. All names are pseudonyms.
- [4] I first took this approach in my image-based ethnographic study of how low-income, mostly African-American pregnant girls experience 'teenage pregnancy' – a phenomenon and stigmatising label they were keenly aware of and navigated within the multiple contexts of family, school and community (Luttrell 2003).
- [5] 'Controlling images' is Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) term; her work focuses on the objectification and control of the sexuality of Black men and women. Her theory about controlling images can be extended to any number of intersecting systems of oppression that objectify individuals (in this case children) and rob them of their dignity and humanity.
- [6] In 2006 and 2007 I helped organise two conferences, funded by Harvard University's David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, entitled *Visible Rights*:

- Photography By and For Children*, to build links between youth civic engagement, social activism and the visual arts. These conferences brought together artists, educators, child rights advocates and scholars from North and South America to explore the role that photography can play in facilitating children's agency and promoting their rights. My participation in these conferences opened up myriad questions about the role of photography in fostering children's rights, participation and control over representing themselves. <http://www.culturalagents.org/int/visible.html>; [http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/brazil/events/visible\\_rights](http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/brazil/events/visible_rights); [http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/brazil/events/visible\\_rights07](http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/brazil/events/visible_rights07).
- [7] See Pat Thomson (2008, 4–6) for her discussion/critique of 'voice' research and its tendency to universalise the experience of children and youth. She reviews five different kinds of voice to which researchers have paid attention – authoritative, critical, therapeutic, consumer and pedagogic – and suggests there may be more. She also breaks down two different types of approach to visual research – those in which researchers use visual methods *on* children (where children are framed as the subjects of inquiry), and those that use visual methods *with* children/youth as partners in inquiry.
- [8] See Brown (1998) for an exemplary account that conceptualises voice in social and psychological ways.
- [9] See Daiute and Nelson (1997) for discussion of children's narratives as insight into self, identity and social consciousness.
- [10] See Briggs 1986; Bruner 1986; Mishler 1986; Chase 2003; Riessman 2008 for discussion of narrative as a meaning-making process.
- [11] These are the labels and percentages provided by the school; they do not publish records of immigrant status of the children. Students are eligible for free and reduced lunch in schools if their family income is at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty line. In the United States the percentage of students in a school receiving free and reduced lunch is an indicator of the socio-economic status of a school.
- [12] I am currently following up with participants in their senior year of high school, inviting them to look back on their images.
- [13] A discussion about ethics and the dilemmas of consent in school-based projects is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is a topic well worth mentioning. See Morrow and Richards 1996; Thomas and O'Kane 1998; Valentine 1999; David, Edwards, and Alldred 2001; White et al. 2010.
- [14] Here I shift to the pronoun we to include the many doctoral research assistants who participated in this process, including J. Poser (Poser 2007); interviewers E. Mishkin, M. Tieken, and C. Shalaby; and data analysts J. Broussard, S. Deckman, J. Dorsey and J. Hayden.
- [15] See Gross, Katz, and Ruby (1988) for a discussion of visual ethics. We encouraged the children to practise (through role-playing) asking people for permission to photograph, and discussed with them why a person might want to say no, and how this also related to their own participation in the project. We also talked about photographs that they might decide they did not want to show, discuss or select for public viewing.
- [16] We also brainstormed with the children and generated more specific prompts, including: 'Take pictures of what learning is like at school'; 'What makes you feel proud (of your school, family community)?'; 'What is something that concerns you about your community?'; 'Who or what do you admire?'; 'Take pictures of places inside and outside of school where you feel comfortable?'; 'Take pictures of places inside and outside of school where you feel respect?'; 'Take pictures of places inside and outside of school where you feel like you belong?'; 'What do you do after school and on the weekends?'
- [17] A full discussion of this pattern (and the one exception) are beyond the scope of this article.
- [18] There are multiple ways to read the children's consumer culture pictures and dialogues (Cook 2004; Pugh 2009). White et al. (2010) found a similar finding in a photography project with immigrant children in Ireland.
- [19] See Sharples et al. (2003) for a study of what children at different ages do with cameras in which they developed independent coding schemes for content and intention.
- [20] These idioms include relative size; the feminine touch; function ranking; the (nuclear) family; and rituals of subordination (Goffman 1979).
- [21] Thanks to this team, including J. Dorsey, J. Hayden, B. Malik, D. Saintil Previna, C. Shalaby, R. Rao, and E. Bright.
- [22] See Thorne (2001) for her discussion of reading signs of care – across lines of social class, race and gender, and across cultural divides and child-rearing philosophies.
- [23] Clark-Ibanez (2004) reports that it was common for the children in her study to take photographs of 'big-ticket items', and that the most common theme for why they photographed such items was so they would 'have a memory of it in case it gets stolen or taken away' (1521). The children in this study were more likely to explain how they or their family had come to acquire such items – in this case, computers, large-screen televisions, new sofas and 'bedroom sets' (e.g. 'my grandmother got a new sofa so she gave us hers'; 'I got this computer for Christmas').
- [24] Lareau (2003) argues that the middle-class 'concerted cultivation' approach to childrearing advantages children in school settings.
- [25] See Hochschild (2003) about children as eavesdroppers and what they learn from parental negotiations about their care; and Romero (2001) about what children learn from being taken by their mothers to their jobs.
- [26] See Riessman (2008, 12–13) for her discussion of the value of combining categorical and case-based analysis when studying individual agency and intention. I am indebted to her and to Elliott Mishler for helping me think through the arc of the analytic process in this study.

- [27] This is Lutz and Collins' (1993) phrase for talking about the production, circulation and interpretation of images in *National Geographic* that serve to both reflect and create western views of cultural difference and hierarchies in the service of imperial power and oppression.
- [28] Miriam Hirsch (1997) discusses the ideological effects of family photographs: '... because the photograph gives the illusion of being a simple transcription of the real. A trace touched directly by the event it records, it has the effect of naturalising cultural practices and of disguising their stereotyped and coded characteristics. As photography immobilises the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history' (7).
- [29] Discussion of these overlapping concerns in visual research is beyond the scope of the article, but see Prosser (2000) about the 'moral maze' of concerns in visual research (Gold 1989).

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